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Research-based development of the pedagogical practices of Helsinki Summer School: Past, present and future

Evaluation report 2: Summary of the feedback from HSS 2015 courses

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1. Introduction

In the spring 2014, the Helsinki Summer School initiated a project for investigating the existing practices of the Summer School in order to get suggestions for improvements. The first report of the study focused on evaluating the pedagogical practices of the year 2014 courses (Lakkala & Ilomäki, 2014). Also a journal article based on the study is submitted for publication (Lakkala, Ilomäki, Mikkonen, Muukkonen & Toom, 2016). The main results indicated that most of the HSS courses represented pedagogical approaches rich in methods and emphasizing students' active involvement and interaction. Based on the multifaceted data collected from the course practices (lesson observations, teacher interviews, schedules and brochures), the courses were categorized into three pedagogical types: *Self-directed academic studying* (4 courses), *Practices of active learning* (5 courses), and *Practices of shared expertise* (7 courses). The examination of students' answers to feedback statements separately for each course type revealed that the students valued the second and third types of courses more than the first type. Factors that students mentioned as positive in their open-ended responses were related to high-quality teaching arrangements, expert knowledge and practices, intercultural social interaction, and interesting and useful course content.

The present report summarizes the feedback collected from the students and teachers of the HSS 2015 courses especially concerning the pedagogical aspects and the participants' experiences of them.

There were major changes in Helsinki Summer School organization in 2015. First of all, Aalto University and Hanken School of Economics did not have courses in summer school 2015. However, the number of courses raised from 16 courses to 20 with 8 new courses from the University of Helsinki. Summer school marketing was changed under the University of Helsinki's visual brand and at the end of the summer the new web pages were published. In addition, Helsinki Summer School reformulated the course instructions on the Wiki-pages of the University of Helsinki with new pedagogical guidelines based on the pedagogical research done in the previous year. HSS also launched the Moodle platform as a learning and information tool (e.g. for the distribution of information on courses and social program) and tested new services for the teachers at the summer school's service desk.

1.1. Aims of the study

The feedback form used by HSS for students and teachers was changed based on the results of the previous study of HSS 2014 courses. The aim of the present study is to:

1. Prove information for the HSS organizers about the quality of HSS 2015 courses based on the participant feedback;
2. Evaluate the functionality of new research-informed statements developed for the students' feedback form.

2. Methods

2.1. Courses and participants

In August 2015, Helsinki Summer School offered 20 courses from the fields of Environmental Food and Biological Sciences, Health Sciences, Humanities and Social Sciences as well as Natural Sciences. In all, 328 students participated in the courses, in the smallest course there were only 6 students, in the biggest course 26 students. On average, there were 16.4 students per course. Of those, 258 answered the feedback form, which was 78.7 % of all participants, and 12.9 students per course on average. The general rate of respondents was quite good.

Each HSS course has a course coordinator and the number of the teachers and lecturers varies according to the course. The link to the feedback form was sent to the coordinators with a request of forwarding it to the teachers. In all, 39 teachers and coordinators answered the form from all 20 courses.

2.2. Data collection

For the HSS courses in August 2015 the data was collected at the end of the Summer School using eForm service of the university. In the present study, the data was as follows:

- Students' answered to 11 mainly pedagogy-oriented statements of the HSS online feedback form. (The overall feedback form included also other statements that focused on HSS services for students in general; they were not included in the present study. The statements used Likert-scale (1=disagree - 5=fully agree) about the quality of the course. The statements were the following:
 - Course literature and other material were of high quality
 - Overall level of lectures was of high quality
 - The title of the course corresponded to the course content
 - The academic content of the course was of high quality
 - Structure and organization of the course was good
 - Quality of English spoken by teachers was good
 - The workload of the course was appropriate
 - Course assignments supported students' interaction and collaboration
 - Students' multicultural and multidisciplinary background was taken into account
 - Digital technology was utilized in a meaningful way
 - Facilities provided by the university were good
- Students' answers to two open questions in the feedback form: *What has been positive or impressive in the course? What has been disturbing or needs improving in the course?* In all, 210 students answered the first question, 217 answered the second question.

- Teachers' answers to three open questions in the feedback form: *What has been positive or impressive in the course? What has been disturbing or needs improving in the course? Other comments about your course.* In all, 34 lecturers or coordinators answered the first question, 25 answered the second question, and 15 answered the third question.

2.3. Data analysis

Pedagogy-oriented statements

The data was analyzed with IBM SPSS statistical software. The analysis was mainly conducted on the overall level of Helsinki Summer School because the amount of respondents of some courses was very small (4 as the lowest). However, some approximate analyses are conducted also on course level, mainly to compare the results with the open-ended answers. No course-level results based on the statements will be presented in the results.

Qualitative analysis of the open questions

Students' and teachers' open-ended responses about the positive or disturbing aspects of the course were categorized by applying data-driven thematic content analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The categories and their frequencies are presented in the results section.

3. Results

3.1. Students' perspectives of the HSS 2015 courses

Students' answers to eleven statements concerning the courses and to two open-ended questions in the online feedback questionnaire were used as data to evaluate the success of the courses from the students' point of view. The number of respondents of each course varied from 4 to 23.

Results from the pedagogy-oriented statements

In general, the results of the 11 statements were very good, as Figure 1 and Table 1 show, and, based on these results, we can say that the students were very satisfied with the courses: the mean of every statement is at least 4.3.

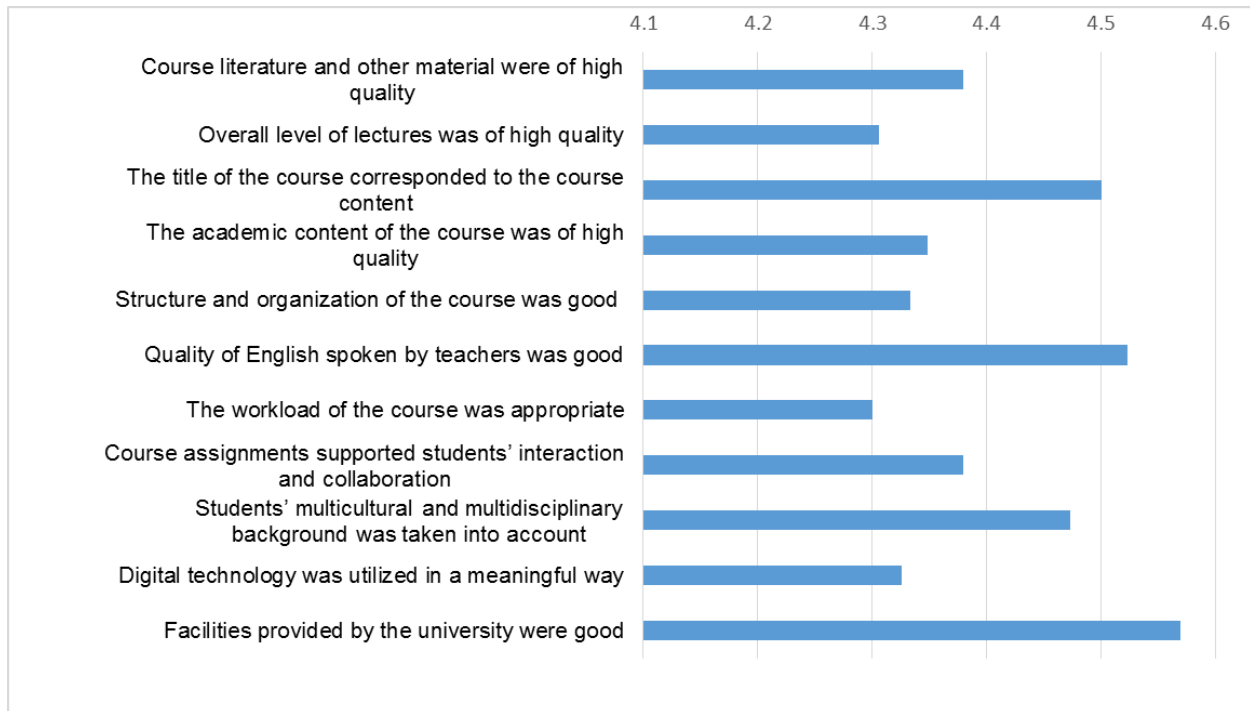


Figure 1. Means of students' responses in each statement.

Table 1. Minimum, maximum and standard deviation in the answers of each statement (N=258).

Statement	Min.	Max.	SD
Course literature and other material were of high quality	2	5	.791
Overall level of lectures was of high quality	1	5	.829
The title of the course corresponded to the course content	1	5	.810
The academic content of the course was of high quality	1	5	.791
Structure and organization of the course was good	1	5	.863
Quality of English spoken by teachers was good	2	5	.696
The workload of the course was appropriate	1	5	.938
Course assignments supported students' interaction and collaboration	1	5	.914
Students' multicultural and multidisciplinary background was taken into account	1	5	.775
Digital technology was utilized in a meaningful way	2	5	.852
Facilities provided by the university were good	2	5	.698

The highest scores are in the statement *Facilities provided by the university* which describes the high quality of Helsinki University as the organizer of Helsinki Summer School. Similarly, *teachers' language competence* has high scores. *The correspondence between the title and the content*

was also evaluated high which describes that the planning work has been conducted well. The lowest scores - but as a matter of fact not very low - were in the statement of the *workload*. In the previous report, this was also an issue discussed.

The feedback form in 2016 was modified from the feedback form used 2015, and there were new statements, so the results cannot fully be compared. However, the mean of answers to the same statements are higher in 2016 (0.2 - 0.7 points) than in 2015. For example, in 2015 the means of only two statements were more than 4, in 2016 the means of every statement were above 4. This shows some improvement in organizing and implementing summer school courses.

A cautious, approximate analysis of the scores showed major differences in the means of the pedagogy-oriented statements*; the highest scores were 4.8 (two courses) and the lowest 3.5 (one course), as Table 2 shows.

Table 2. The means in the statement answers in courses of different categories.*

Mean	4.8-4.7	4.6-4.5	4.4-4.3	4.2-4.0	3.6-3.5
Number of courses	4	5	3	6	2

*The mean of the statements except the statement *Facilities provided by the university* because the facilities were the same for all courses.

Results from the content analysis of the open-ended questions

In all, 370 excerpts from the students' answers were encoded to address positive or impressive issues. The following list presents the main categories and subcategories that were constructed based on the data-driven analysis to describe the positive or impressive issues mentioned by the students (in parentheses is the number of occurrences of the factors in the students' answers):

- *Satisfactory teaching arrangements (149)*: High-quality of teaching (33), Well-organized and designed (33), Good teachers and lecturers (29), Teachers' attitude and commitment (26), Activating methods (11), Good atmosphere (8), Combination of methods (4), Quality of facilities (3), Taking into account participant backgrounds (2).
- *Expert knowledge and practices (96)*: Excursions and field trips (25), Content expertise of lecturers (24), Many expert lecturers from various fields (12), Authentic practices & field work (11), Variety of contents and viewpoints (11), Practical content (6), Integration of theory and practice (3), Research-based content (2), Academic content (2).
- *Intercultural social interaction (77)*: Interaction & discussions between participants (33), Multicultural and multidisciplinary assembly (25), Group work (10), Nice participants (7), Proper group size (2).
- *Satisfactory course content (48)*: Interesting and useful content (26), Learnt new content and thinking (13), Effective coverage of content (6), Materials (3).

Many comments addressed the high-level of teaching and course organization in general, as well as teachers' positive attitude; for example: *"Teachers' attitudes towards students were very kind and helpful. They were open to discussion and to help."* The students also valued the high-level expertise of lecturers and versatile activities that introduced them to authentic and real-life methods and practices in addition to theoretical knowledge, such as project work, workshops, excursions and field work. For example:

"The hands-on sessions in the labs were great"

"The fact that we have been required to apply the theory to real cases and to really think with the concepts we learned in class (really different from university in Italy) was extremely fruitful."

"The visits of companies during the course were really good."

Naturally the interaction and discussions in the international and multidisciplinary group of participants was mentioned by many students; e.g. *"My classmates are all smart and contributed a lot in class discussion. I learnt a lot from them."*

In all, 224 excerpts from the students' answers addressed issues that had been disturbing or needed improvement in the courses. The issues were divided into the following categories and subcategories (in parentheses is the number of occurrences of the issue in the students' answers):

- *Uninspiring knowledge and activities (83)*: Narrow content focus (15), Too superficial content (12), Too little interaction between participants (10), Content not practical enough (7), Too little activating methods (7), Too little excursions (6), Not challenging enough (5), Too little practical work (5), Too much lecturing (5), No experts from the field as lecturers (4), No field work (3), Low academic level (2), Irrelevant tasks (2).
- *Unsatisfactory teaching arrangements (80)*: Poor integration of topics (13), Poor quality of teaching (11), Distribution of course materials (9), Unclear assignments (8), Problems with technology (7), Poor time management (7), Overlap between lectures (6), Not well-organized (5), Misleading course name or description (5), Poor communication (4), Students as lecturers (3), Size of the group (2).
- *Heavy workload and time constraints (27)*: Heavy workload (14), Balancing studying and free time (6), Too short course (5), Too long days (2).
- *Challenges with intercultural social interaction (18)*: English skills of students/teachers (7), Diverse participant backgrounds and motivations (7), Too much group work (4).
- *Challenges with content learning (16)*: Not enough teaching of basics (8), Participant backgrounds not taken into account (8).

Most of the students' critical comments addressed uninspiring course content or activities, or the quality of practical teaching arrangements in general. The students complained if the content of the course was too general or narrow (e.g. *"did not add anything to the literature (all the course content comes from one book)"*) or the teaching methods were too lecture-based without interaction, practical work or excursions (e.g. *"and the schedule of having many lectures did not allow time for much class discussion"* or *"It would be good if there would be the possibility to do more intensive fieldwork"*). The students addressed weaknesses in teaching practices rather than

their own study challenges relatively more than in the previous year perhaps because of the change in the question formulation: in 2014, students were asked “What has been challenging or disturbing in the course?”, in 2015 the question was “What has been disturbing or needs improving in the course?”

Altogether, it is noteworthy that the number of positive factors found in the students open-ended answers was clearly higher (370) than the number of negative factors (224).

3.2. Teachers’ perspectives on their courses

Teachers understandably partly focused on different issues than students in their open-ended answers. In all, 80 excerpts from the teachers’ answers were coded to address positive or impressive issues. The following list presents the main categories and subcategories in the teachers’ answers (in parentheses is the number of occurrences of the factors in the teachers’ answers):

- *Good student group (40)*: Enthusiastic and motivated students (15), Active students (10), Great students (8), Knowledgeable students (6), Good target group for MA program (1).
- *Satisfactory teaching arrangements (16)*: Good atmosphere (5), Good teachers and lecturers (4), Well-organized (3), Good content (2), Good materials (1), Good presentations (1).
- *Intercultural social interaction (13)*: Interaction & discussions between participants (6), Multicultural assembly (4), Learned from students (3).
- *Positive experience (11)*: Rewarding teaching experience (5), Willing to do it again (3), Working with HSS Office (2), Help from the coordinator (1).

The teachers were especially impressed by the students participating in their course; half of the positive comments addressed students, e.g.: “*They were open to new learning methods*”. Some teachers were very pleased with the teaching experience that they got from the HSS course, for example: “*It was one of the best teaching experience I have ever had.*”

Only 24 excerpts from the teachers’ answers related to factors that had been disturbing or needed improvement in the courses. The issues were divided into the following categories and subcategories (in parentheses is the number of occurrences of the issue in the teachers’ answers):

- *Challenges with students (11)*: No Finnish students (3), Passive or absent students (3), Heterogeneous background knowledge (2), English skills of some students (2), Too small group (1).
- *General organization (8)*: Too few resources (4), Improving teacher collaboration (2), Improving course description (1), Need information about expectations for the coordinator (1).
- *Unsatisfactory teaching arrangements (5)*: Improving working methods (2), Poor teaching skills of some lecturers (1), Not well coordinated (1), Problems with technology (1).

One interesting notion from the teacher reflections is that only two teachers mentioned the need for improvements in the ways of working in the course; in the students' open-ended answers it was a quite central issue. One teacher pondered the working methods based on student feedback: *"This was the first time we organized the course, and whereas the overall feedback was positive, we can include more field-work. This is based on the feedback from the students."*

4. Discussion and conclusions

The analysis of student feedback from the Helsinki Summer School 2015 courses showed that students were, in general, very satisfied with their study experience and teaching in the courses, both concerning content, working methods, and the international atmosphere. The mean scores given by students in all courses together on the pedagogy-oriented statements are all above 4, and in the open-ended answers students mentioned much more positive than negative factors about the courses. This result is very similar to the results of the study of HSS 2014 courses (Lakkala & Ilomäki, 2015) or - as a matter of fact - even better.

The statistical and the qualitative results are somewhat contradictory in an interesting way. Although student feedback based on the statements is very good, in the open-ended answers students also mention many unsatisfactory aspects of the courses. It is understandable that no course is perfect and, if specifically asked, students also explicate points to be improved. The results, in general, confirm the conclusions of the study of HSS 2014 courses (Lakkala et al., 2016) that students appreciate courses that combine high-quality professional or scientific content expertise of the lecturers with versatile student-centered, practical and collaborative activities. It appears that some HSS 2015 courses still had too much emphasis on traditional lecturing and theoretical and academic content without a connection to professional and practical knowledge and activities. The HSS office staff produced new pedagogical guidelines for course coordinators and lecturers (in an internal wiki site) based on the recommendations of the HSS 2014 study and arranged a pedagogical workshop in the autumn 2015 for a few participants. We recommend that this type of actions be continued and developed further for future course coordinators and lecturers.

The statement in the students' feedback form with the lowest score was the one about the workload. The heavy workload of the courses was an issue discussed also in the study from the previous year based on the students' open-ended answers (Lakkala & Ilomäki, 2014), and the statement was added in the form of the present year because of that. There are probably several different types of reasons why students regard the workload of a course too heavy: maybe their expectations are more oriented to listening lectures instead of one's own active work; maybe there is too much independent reading and working instead of collaborative working, or maybe the courses just are difficult and workload is necessary for learning the challenging content and practices? One of the reasons might be that if a course is implemented for the first time, or it is designed by teachers who are not very experienced in the pedagogical methods of the course (e.g., collaborative or project-type activities), the workload of the tasks for students might have been underestimated. In such a case, it is very important that the course designers receive the

feedback given by students, and are willing to make corrections on the course design in future iterations.

Compared with the Helsinki Summer School organized in the year 2015, the realization in 2016 consisted of more courses, and courses with wider topics and research fields, which is certainly a positive trend. This also creates challenges: new coordinators, teachers and lecturers who do not yet have experience of teaching in international summer school courses. Some of the new courses had also only a few participants which might not be motivating for the students: a bigger group represents richer variety and more inspiring approaches to the topics under study. Students also have social expectations for their participation in summer schools; in a very small group these expectations might not be realized (about the overall expectations, see Torenbeek & Meyers, 2012). Some teachers gave feedback about the absence of Finnish students in their courses, which made us ponder whether that is an issue to think about in the future. Is it possible to develop some new methods to recruit Finnish students flexibly in the courses; especially in the courses that otherwise do not get enough students?

In the year 2016, Helsinki Summer School did not organize any courses. Based on the results of the present study, HSS made good progress in the year 2016 compared with the year 2015, and many of the shortcomings were put right. We strongly recommend that in the year 2017 Helsinki Summer School will be organized again, which is also one way for the University of Helsinki to show its interest and willingness to advance internationalization.

5. References

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